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Economics, Relationality and The Good Life in Chiawa, Zambia

Sarah C. White, University of Bath, UK

***For Good life beyond Growth: Critical Perspectives*, Routledge, June 2017**

Hartmut Rosa & Christoph Henning (eds.)

Introduction

For most local people in Chiawa, Zambia, life is hard. Located in a Game Management Area just outside the Lower Zambezi National Park, they live with the constant threat of damage to crops, personal injury, or even death, from the crocodiles, elephants, hippos and buffalo who roam freely through the territory. Houses are mainly self-built using home-made mud-bricks and thatch for roofing. Meals are cooked over wood or charcoal. Farming remains a mainstay of livelihoods, often in combination with other activities. Technology is limited, the main implement remains the hoe and mechanised irrigation is rare. Yields are low and subject to multiple hazards: not only damage from wild animals, but also drought from low rainfall and flash floods caused by opening the gates in the major dam upstream. Opportunities for other employment are scarce. For men the main option is work in one of the safari lodges that flank the river. One in five of the men we surveyed was involved in this.¹ A similar proportion of women were involved in petty trading, mainly in extremely marginal enterprises. Other people do various kinds of casual labour and a small number (fewer than one in twenty people) do manual work on commercial farms.

Local amenities are basic: a primary health centre, an agricultural extension office, a community development office, four primary schools, two high schools and many churches. At the time of the research there was no metalled road and access to Chiawa was dependent on a ferry which ran from 6 am to 6 pm.² There was no public transport, so most people had to walk, cycle or rely on private pick-ups and small lorries which run along the main route providing transport to work or the ferry in the mornings and evenings. For most official business people have to cross the river to travel to the district capital of Kafue, and for hospital care to the nearest town of Chirundu.

In contexts like this, what does it mean to talk of 'the good life beyond growth'? This is the question which this chapter seeks to address. This introduction concludes with a brief description of the research on which it is based. Next presented are villagers' own perspectives on what a good life (or 'wellbeing') means. These emphasise the centrality of material sufficiency but locate this in a *relational* context: the importance of 'taking care' of others. The following section describes how the poverty of local livelihoods is only one part of the economy of Chiawa. It exists alongside, and is deeply intertwined with, a 'modern' development sector of high inputs and high profits. The chapter closes by describing what can be learned from the Chiawa case. Theoretically, it suggests the need to make relationality central to understandings of wellbeing. Substantively, it shows that Chiawa villagers do consider economic development to be a vital component of 'the good life', but that this needs to take a form that puts people and the environment, not simply growth and profits, at the centre.

The field research on which this paper is based took place in two rounds of four months August-November, 2010 and 2012. A research officer led the fieldwork, working with a team of three local men and one nationally recruited Zambian

researcher.³ Focused on wellbeing, it considered both how people were doing in material terms (livelihoods and hunger, education and health) and how they were thinking and feeling about their lives. The main instrument was a survey, which combined objective (self-report) questions with questions about satisfaction and 'inner wellbeing', what people thought and felt themselves able to do and be (see White *et al.* 2014). This was undertaken with 412 people in 2010 and 370 in 2012. Where possible the same people were interviewed on both occasions to build up a sense of wellbeing over time.⁴ In addition to the quantitative data we have 54 qualitative records of notes made during the survey interviews, 52 open-ended life history interviews and one focus group discussion. These were translated simultaneously and recorded and transcribed verbatim. For further details see www.wellbeingpathways.org.

Local Perspectives on Wellbeing in Chiawa

Given the harsh conditions and material scarcity of village life in Chiawa, it is not surprising that economic sufficiency is the first thing that people mention when you ask about wellbeing. The following comment from a married man is typical:

Most essential thing I want to say is that one must be able to have sufficient food for him and also his family.

Many emphasised the importance of land and farming as the basis of their livelihood. For some this was everything. An elderly man put it like this:

Wellbeing is all about if you have everything that you want, you are able to farm and harvest whatever is supposed to be harvested and also when things go according to plan and then even other people will also say 'I think he is wellbeing'.

For others, though, farming was the basis around which other activities might take place. A school teacher talked about his hopes for retirement:

Yes just buy a plot of a farm and just locate myself there. I can do some other things, but meanwhile I have the farm.

A married woman in her thirties whose husband had worked in a safari lodge, explained:

I think that is not only the money that makes a better life because even when you are in the home you don't fight and we are able maybe to farm, get a good harvest, get enough food even without money that would still be a good life.

For some people the question drew attention to what they felt was missing. A woman who bitterly regretted not finishing her studies because she left school to marry, for instance, emphasised education in her response:

Well a good life for myself is, not having gone for an education still pains me, because I also admire the people who speak good English, are able to talk in English, those good communication skills in the language.

Her answer was unusual in the way it concentrated on her own needs as an individual. As is evident from the examples above, in the vast majority of cases people answered in a more collective way, about their family's wellbeing. The following quotation expresses this clearly.

For me a better life would start with the people that I live with in my household, they have to be able to have what they want – their basic needs, the things that they need should be there. And for me, I think I must have good employment, I must have money – not necessarily enough money but I must have money so that I am able to provide the necessary food that is needed, the necessary things that my people in my household need. Definitely then I would say my life is ok.

This introduces the second key issue that ran through most people's thinking on wellbeing – it involved *taking care* of others. The purpose of wealth was not to accumulate as an individual, but to provide for and share with others. Another man describes how his moral and social identity is built through his giving of care to his family:

I am taking care of my wife; I am taking care of my son; and also I am taking care of my mother; my own brothers and sisters who are in the village. I buy my mum some clothes, some blankets, I also send some money there and even there in the village most people really seek to say that 'this mother's son is taking good care of her. He must be a loving and caring son'. So I do take care of my mother and my brothers and sisters and also of my wife and my own son. At least other people are able to tell themselves that this person is a 'father' to his family.

A woman whose husband had signally failed to provide for her or their children, similarly chose to emphasise a man's duties as the way things ought to be:

What I can say for somebody to be living a good life is when one is in a marriage; first of all, your husband must stand up and say 'I have a wife whom I need to take care of.' Second also, one must be ready to bear responsibilities on his children. Also one must be ready to send his children to school so that if things fail you can say that things failed because of this reason, it's not that you neglected them. (MW 90)

As this quotation suggests, marriage – especially when 'in the home you don't fight' – is central to understandings of wellbeing in Chiawa. Here again the relationship is seen in active voice, it is not something inert or static but realised through the giving of care. This association of marriage with wellbeing has material dimensions – as a group, single women are doing worse than married people on virtually every economic indicator. In life history interviews single women also talked a great deal about the social marginality that they felt, experiencing suspicion and hostility from married women and sexual predation from married men. Interestingly, the issue of 'taking care' was a strong theme in single women's explanations of both why they might, and why they would not, seek to marry again. While some hoped for a new husband who would look after themselves and their children, a larger number stated that they would not re-marry, in the belief that another man would never take care of their children as his own.

While caring for one's immediate family might be common across most if not all human societies, the web of care that people envisaged in Chiawa was particularly wide. As one man powerfully summed it up:

Well, if one is to live a good life in our community...I think first of all one must have enough food for his family... for himself and his family. And must also have something to share with the community, because like you don't just say, "No, this is for my family alone," but you've also got some other relatives, some friends who can come and ask for things.

This echoes the broader ethnography of Africa. As the anthropologist James Ferguson (2007:72) states:

'the production of wealth throughout wide areas of southern and central Africa is understood to be inseparable from the production of social relations. Production of wealth can be understood as pro-social, morally valuable "work," "producing oneself by producing people, relations, and things" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:143). Alternatively it can be understood as anti-social, morally illegitimate appropriation that is exploitative and destructive of community.'

While there are clearly distinct expectations of particular (gendered) roles, the overall context conjures a sense of generalised reciprocity – that what goes around, comes around, especially between kin. Within this the material and the relational are again closely intertwined. The following statement expresses this well:

By helping both the sides I was not looking at my direct personal benefit because they being relatives, I felt maybe at one point that you never know who is going to help whom; because maybe if I helped my relatives maybe at some point they also help me or my children, or maybe their children who help my children. My wife's relatives also look at me as being a good person.

Also, you never know who is going to be helped between my children and them.

Maintaining such an ethic in the face of material scarcity may not be straightforward. Social pressure to express willingness to assist may compete with the knowledge that one's own resources are already over-stretched. More positively, the power of norms of reciprocity, coupled with the intricate interweaving of kin relationships in Chiawa, provides a strong argument for overcoming grievances, at least at the level of outward interaction. The following comment gives an example of this. Describing how he now goes drinking again with people who earlier caused him some major, deliberate harm, a man explains:

But he has openly come to me to ask forgiveness, forgiving for what I don't know. But I have said, 'oh, just forget, we are brothers,' moreover he is my father's cousin, why should we continue remaining like this, let's forgive and forget about it.

This is, of course, the ideal. It may not express the whole truth, even of this particular exchange. What it does, however, suggest, is that the relatively closed community of Chiawa, where so many people can trace a thread of common identity and belonging, results almost in enforced reciprocity – even if someone has done you great harm, you cannot avoid social interaction with him or her. A negative outcome of this is it seems to result in considerable levels of ambivalence and undercurrents of fear and mistrust, as people suspect that beneath the smiling faces there may be very different thoughts and intentions. One of the most common phrases was: 'You do not know what is in people's hearts', often used as a veiled hint of suspicions of witchcraft. As discussed later in the paper, this may also be a social indicator of the deep economic and political insecurity that is part of life in Chiawa.

This section has provided an introduction to the cultural construction of wellbeing in Chiawa, in which the material and relational are inextricably linked together. In the giving and receiving of material goods people affirm and confirm their identities and their personal and social relationships, extending through time and space. This may not be always how it is, but it is how people believe it should be.

The Other Economy

While the picture with which this chapter opened might conjure familiar associations of 'traditional' Africa, trapped in poverty, left behind by the modern world, in fact nothing could be further from the case. The marginal and precarious character of villagers' livelihoods is directly related to the 'modern development' that the area has seen. Connections between the two economies are evident at many levels. The Kariba dam upstream is a major source of electricity for both Zambia and Zimbabwe. Its construction in the 1950s reduced the natural rise and fall of the Zambezi river which had provided irrigation and renewed fertility to the land beside it (Lancaster 1981:78). Such land have long been a popular, though risky, complement to the larger fields dependent on summer rains where the main subsistence crop is grown. When they flood now, however, it is sudden and disastrous, following the deliberate opening of spillways to relieve pressure on the dam. In 2011 the situation was so bad that it led Chieftainess Chiawa to appeal for relief food (Globe, 2011).

Competing claims over land comprise the fundamental points of connection and contradiction between local livelihoods and the development sector. As indicated above, it is the safari sector that provides local people with the best opportunities for employment. Nevertheless the contrast in profits is considerable. Chiawa lodges

offer luxury accommodation options – a per person tariff of \$500-600 per night is by no means unusual. Local staff salaries range from around \$100 to \$300 per *month*, although guides may make considerably more.⁵

While a job in the safari sector is very desirable for the mainly young men who can get them, the contribution of such jobs to the wellbeing of the community as a whole may be rather ambivalent. The main observable differences in Chiawa between 2010 and 2012 were more cars and more – and more fancy – bars. Such changes tally with what people say in the community – that the money from safari lodge work is mainly spent on conspicuous consumption, girlfriends or drink. This is supported by evidence from Harland (2008:82) that lodge workers cheerfully discussed their ‘girlfriends’. Harland also notes that in 2005 the Chiawa clinic officer reported that *all* pregnant wives of safari workers had tested positive for syphilis. In 2013 the clinic officer again confirmed that in most cases the sexual histories taken from people with sexually transmitted infections involved contact with a safari lodge worker. Older men also state that such work inverts the traditional patterns of dominance, as young men with more money no longer show them the respect they feel they deserve. By contrast, however, a number of the workers we spoke to suggested their safari wages were the means by which they could honour their responsibilities for ‘taking care’ of the extended family. No doubt the truth lies somewhere in between.

Land

Historically, most of the land in Chiawa is customary land, held in trust by the Chieftainess. In 1995, however, the government, in compliance with donor conditionality, brought in a Land Act which allowed customary land to pass into private hands for the purposes of development. While in theory the Act makes it

easier for ordinary villagers to gain title to the land they occupy, the need to gain the local chief's permission and the cost of the surveying and titling process are in practice prohibitive for all but the wealthy (Brown, 2005: 90-91). Also, while no land should be alienated without full consultation with all stakeholders, including anyone living there, 'this proviso.. is seldom adhered to' (Brown: 2005:92-3).

In areas like Chiawa, offering good potential for commercial agriculture and tourism, the process of land alienation has been rapid. Bond (1998: 148) notes that in 1996 there were only three outside investors with land-titles in Chiawa, but by 1999 there were twenty more.⁶ By 2012, almost all the most desirable land along the river was in the hands of the safari lodges, except that retained by the chieftainess herself. Talk of the new bridge and road to be built sent the process of land alienation in Chiawa into rapid acceleration. In 2012, notices proclaiming 'private property' over an area of scrub-land were a common-place. In 2010 we saw few, if any.

The alienation of land to outside investors carries a nexus of worries for the community in Chiawa. The first is the loss of usufruct rights to the common property on which the fragile balance of their livelihoods depends. Whatever promises are made at the time of purchase, people fear that they will no longer be able to move freely. They will either be charged entry and exit fee or kept from going through the area at all. They will lose access to the river and grass and firewood.

The second concern is the indirect effects of the impact fenced off areas have on the movement of wild animals. The following quotation expresses this well.

In the past, we didn't have these investments that we have now, animals were free to move longer distances, we have the elephant corridor, locally known as Kalungaile, this corridor is said to run from Mozambique up to the

southern province and elephants used to go through that corridor and they had breeding places along the corridor, one of them is where Zambeef is, it was thick bush. But now that has been blocked, it is a fenced farm, where do the elephants go? ... The points where they used to go and drink have been blocked by lodges, this has caused more human-animal conflict. Just here in Chiawa, between the chief's house and the high school, elephants used to pass there, now they are forced to pass through that narrow place. Already there is a fence coming they're saying that is private land. One day the owner will put a fence there, where will the elephant pass? It will pass through the village, and what will happen? Elephants will kill people. So those are things that need to be looked at if we want to develop Chiawa.

The third fear is the loss of their own homes and farms. In Chiawa, very few local people have titles to their land. While customarily those who have once been granted land have the right to remain on it, the ultimate fear is that people will be displaced from their land and their homes. Some have already been moved. Bawa Yamba, (2006) reports evictions were already taking place in 1994. In our fieldwork we encountered people who were currently being threatened with removal, their land staked out with beacons, and told that someone with a counter claim was going to occupy it. One large new area of land that has recently been allocated to investors extends to almost 16,000 hectares. Far from being consulted before the land was put on title, as the terms of the Land Act require, local people whose farms fall within the 16,000 hectares only found out about it two years after the transfer had gone through. It is in the competition for land that the potential conflict between economic development and local people's wellbeing becomes most acute.

Reflection

For people in Chiawa, relationality is at the centre of wellbeing. This echoes the recognition in contemporary scholarship on happiness and psychological wellbeing that positive relationships with others are important to an individual's wellbeing (e.g. (e.g. Ryff 1989, Ryan and Deci 2001, Saphire-Bernstein and Taylor 2013). But it also goes some way beyond this to put relationality, rather than the self, at the centre. Wellbeing shifts from being seen as an internal state that an individual has within him or herself to an energy, process or flow that happens in the interaction between people, especially between kin. A good life involves playing one's part well in enabling this flow to circle and increase. This in turn makes clear that a good life is not something abstract or merely subjective, but is materially grounded in a particular place and time. Taking care of others means meeting their material, not simply psychological or emotional, needs.

The materiality and relationality of wellbeing has another dimension also. This is that human wellbeing is intrinsically tied up with the processes of the natural world: the land, the river, the sunshine and rain, the animals. As with many similar communities, this mutual dependence used to be celebrated each year in collective rituals around harvest-time. The current Chieftainess Chiawa put a stop to these as a pagan practice not suitable for a Christian leader to follow. Nonetheless, the sense of that inter-dependence persists, as the last quotation above makes very clear. The elephants had their own trails, which the local people knew and respected in locating their villages and negotiating access to water and other necessities. Ironically it was the safari lodges, for whose business the elephants play such an essential role, who failed to take this into account, and so disrupted the balance leaving both animals and villagers more vulnerable. The environmental cost of large intensive agri-business plantations is beginning to be recognised. Further back in time the

establishment of the Kariba dam can be seen to have caused a similar break-down in the accustomed mutuality of the rise and fall of the river level with the local agricultural system of river-side gardens.

To recognise such relationships is not to romanticise the past or suggest 'the good life' lies in a return to 'tradition', whatever that might be. But it is to recognise the need to move forward together, the people and that part of the planet given to them. As Bikret (2012) suggests in a very different context, one dimension of this might be to re-kindle the sense of the sacred in the relations of the earth to its people. More prosaically, social institutions such as laws that configure rights to land, policies that prioritise one form of investment (and investor) over others, or institutions of governance that designate chieftainship or democracy, clearly have a critical influence in mediating wellbeing. In thinking about wellbeing, or the good life, then, there is much to be said for taking a relational approach, which sees wellbeing as emerging through the interaction of personal processes (the interchange amongst kin and community) societal processes (laws, policies, cultural norms, governance institutions and market structures) and environmental processes (the rejuvenation, adaptation or degradation of natural systems). An image of this is presented in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

In most of this chapter I have emphasised the 'good life' part of the book's title. In closing it is important to consider the 'beyond growth' dimension. In many ways Chiawa presents a hard case for this, because it seems clear that some degree of economic growth is required if people are to be able to live the lives they should be entitled to in the twenty-first century. And there is no doubt that there is tremendous

appetite for development. The constant stress that people placed on the education of their children as the hope for the future is evidence of that.

Since farming remains the mainstay of livelihoods in Chiawa, a full investigation needs to be undertaken into the support needed to make small-holder agriculture more viable. This should consider issues such as the appropriate crops; potential for irrigation; conservation practices to resist and reverse environmental degradation; fencing and other means to defend against predation from animals; scope for mechanisation; and facilities for the storage and marketing of produce.

While such measures may improve livelihoods, it seems clear that the safari industry offers an important part of Chiawa's future. Models of co-ownership, such as the communal wildlife conservancies of Namibia, where local people are involved in the management of and share the profits from lodges in their area, need to be explored. Planned carefully, and with a readiness to re-locate some of the existing lodges, tourism profits could be produced far more efficiently, shared far more equitably with leave a far smaller environmental footprint.

This paper has shown that in many ways Chiawa already has the resources it needs for a positive future. It began by describing local understandings of wellbeing and their strong ethic of care and reciprocity which stretches across time and space, as people affirm and confirm their identities and their personal and social relationships through the giving and receiving of material goods. This is a powerful place to begin thinking about a new model of 'the good life', which is built on an ethic of mutual responsibility, rather than the enrichment of some at the expense of others.

Endnotes

¹ Details of this survey are given below. It was conducted in Chiawa ward, whereas the region of Chiawa also includes Kambale ward. As safari lodge employment was more common in Chiawa ward, our figure of 22% men working in lodges certainly over-estimates the prevalence of this employment in the region as a whole.

² The research on which this chapter is based took place in 2010-2013. A bridge was completed in August 2014 which replaced the ferry. Major work is also going on to build a new road through Chiawa from the Zambian capital Lusaka to the Zimbabwe border at Chirundu. These developments will have a major impact on the quality of life in Chiawa.

³ Similar research was led by the same research officer in a second site, in India. See e.g. Jha and White (2015). While we attempted to recruit women to the Zambia team we were unable to find any women locally who had good enough English.

⁴ 358 respondents were interviewed in both rounds.

⁵ 2012 prices.

⁶ This anomaly of dates (thesis completed in 1998 but figures given for 1999) is in the original.

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Figure 1. The Constitution of Relational Wellbeing

